

Eötvös Loránd University

Faculty of Humanities

“Doctoral (PhD) Thesis”

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Lajos Vajda’s Chequered Notebooks

*A comparison of the analysis of space found in Lajos Vajda’s Szentendre townscapes
and depictions of buildings with the sources found in his Chequered Notebooks.*

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My research is based on a study of Lajos Vajda's written legacy. The amount of the extant documents is not considerable: apart from three notebooks and a few notes (pages from notebooks, pieces of pages from notebooks and request slips from libraries), there are only the letters written to and saved by his wife at our disposal alongside a few letters and postcards that have remained for posterity by chance. The complete text of the letters he exchanged with his wife between 1936 and 1941 and remained in his estate were published in 1996 in a volume edited by Vera Jakovits and Gyula Kozák, the trustees of the Vajda estate. With reference to the chequered black-and-white covers of the notebooks, Stefánia Mándy used the term „chequered” in his 1983 essay. Mándy publishes four pages of details from the briefly described two notebooks and does not pay enough attention to the notes on Vajda's reading, despite the fact that the greater part of the two notebooks is devoted to this. With regard to the third notebook, Mándy mentions that it contains a fragment of a translation of Chagall's autobiography *Ma Vie*, which Vajda had begun translating in the spring of 1936.

The basis of my research is a philological task related to the Chequered Notebooks. The greatest challenge here besides the hardly decipherable handwriting and densely covered pages is the shorthand used for the texts in various languages.

With regard to the examination of the written sources, I produced a bibliography categorized by subject on the basis of the reading lists identified in the Chequered Notebooks that shows what areas of interest were covered by Vajda's reading as well as bringing to light how representative a given subject is in relation to the bibliography as a whole.

I also examined the direction of his reading in the order of the entries in the Chequered Notebooks as I was curious as to the basis for which the entries followed one another and perhaps whether a given book's bibliographical elements were placed next to each other. Through this approach, I attempted to discover whether Vajda really knew these works. This observation was the most interesting in terms of method because the whole reconstruction is based on fragmental notes and the task was also made more difficult because Vajda wrote the notebooks starting from both the front and the back at the same time.

I found no evidence that the bibliographical elements of a single book were placed next to each other but did find that Vajda copied into his medium-sized, Chequered Notebook part of the references in the footnotes in Heinrich Schäfer's *Von ägyptischer Kunst besonders der Zeichenkunst* című könyv (Leipzig, 1919).

In my further research I compared the entries in the Chequered Notebooks and the notes with Vajda's extant letters. My research here was devoted to how Vajda commented on his reading material. On the basis of this, I examined how the thought segments of each book interested him. In this case, the source on Egyptian art already mentioned provided a solution. On 2 May 1937 Vajda in a letter to Julia recommended the book that he found interesting from the standpoint of Egyptian depictions of space and supports this by copying the book's table of contents into the letter, underlining the chapters that he found to be significant.

In parallel with the methodical examinations already mentioned, I attempted to acquaint myself with as many of the works listed in the bibliography as possible so that I would gain an overview of Vajda's "intellectual background". However, due to the enormous length of the list of reading material, I soon realized that this was an impossible challenge. Due to this, on the basis of the results achieved so far, I reduced the scope of my research to the depiction of space. This choice of subject was not only influenced by the results to date (the solution to the dating of the notebooks on the basis of the entries) but also due to personal concerns: I perceived a gap in the academic work on Vajda in that no one had dealt in depth with the works that interested me the most; the drawings of the town of Szentendre that he produced between 1935 and 1938 during the same period as the entries into the small Chequered Notebook.

Despite their number, Vajda's depictions of Szentendre's houses and streets have only been touched on by the academic literature, which tends to expound on them as relating to the "Szentendre programme" or as motifs relating to constructive surrealist subjects.

In this thesis, I regard these graphics as self-standing works and traces of Vajda's experiments in the depiction of space. In the course of their analysis, I aim to show the variety of Vajda's solutions to the analysis of space and then the possible influence of his reading on these works.

In my comparison of the works with the written sources I set out from an observation that led me to suppose that during the period under discussion (1935-1938) Vajda came to work out a new method of depiction following his years spent in Paris that are little known due to the lack of material. He used a method of creating space that was different from that used hitherto and in order to support this discovery I examined the entries. I noted those books dealing with the problems of space and creation of space that the works marked by Vajda referred to. In the second part of my dissertation, I introduce the solutions to the depiction of space used by these cultures (Egyptian, Persian) on the basis of the sources recorded in the entries in the Notebooks and the letters that can be brought into relation with Vajda's graphic works and some of his paintings. Of especial interest with regard to the depiction of space is the role of Vajda's line drawings and the possibility of exchanging the positive and negative forms. This sphere of problematic had already appeared in his earlier montage works but – despite the similarities in style – he now dealt experimented with new solutions to the depiction of space.

The shapes do not mark slices of space in layers on each other but through distortions projected onto the plane they enclose a special form. He did not use the usual systems of geometrical depiction (the Monge type depiction system, axonometric or one and two-point directional perspective) or depict the motifs from a single point of view but drew the contours by following the detection and the direction of the gaze.

This unusual approach to space can be deducted from other sources too: from the depictional systems of Egypt and the Far East that have been neglected by the literature on Vajda to date and from the theories of El Lissitzky and Malevich that are pointed to in Mátyás's essay. This supposition in the latter is supported by the texts noted by Vajda and in the case of the cultures of Egypt and the Far East, in the points found in the entries in the Chequered Notebooks. This justifies my examination of the works marked by Vajda in this regard.

The problem of space is one of the main characteristics of townscapes of the modern and avant-garde. For this reason, I analysed works produced at the same time as the most influential theories of space from this point of view. I did not take into account chronology or the relation to movements of the works but only their structural characteristics in creating groups because in this second part of the dissertation I

concentrated on showing Vajda's individual style in relation to the Vajda works under examination. My aim was to show in what ways Vajda's art diverges from the townscapes of the era and the extent to which his reading influenced this.

It would no doubt be an interesting task to look at how other artists with a similar intellectual approach to Vajda's used their reading materials in their works but this does not relate directly to the subject of this dissertation.

In summary, my research aimed at discovering the extent to which knowledge of the artist's reading material assists in the analysis of works created at the same time. In the comparison with the experiments in the depiction of space of that era, I was interested in how Vajda's experiments with space were different and what relationship they had with his reading material. On the basis of my expectations, the problematic already known from the sources can indeed be isolated in certain works. The content of the Chequered Notebooks can of course be analysed in tandem with Vajda's works not only from the point of view of the depiction of space but also from other standpoints and in this I see further possibilities for research.